

Sovereign Hill **Director Marketing, Garry Burns**

The Product

Sovereign Hill is one of Australia's leading attractions and probably the country's best example of interpretive heritage tourism. In 2005 the Ballarat complex won the Major Tourist Attraction category at both the Victorian Tourism Awards and Australian Tourism Awards. Sovereign Hill's state award saw it enter into Victoria's Hall of Fame.

Since its establishment in 1971 the complex has enjoyed three major growth periods: 1. launch 2. the addition of onsite accommodation 3. the addition of the sound and light show 'Blood on the Southern Cross'. Sovereign Hill's management concedes that it is an attraction in the mature phase of its product lifecycle. Most Victorians visit the property about 4 times in a lifetime.

During 2005-2006 Sovereign Hill attracted 420,000 visitors, including 100,000 school children. International visitors comprise 28% of patronage, of which China is the most significant market.

The issue

Despite its pre-eminence as a tourism attraction, Sovereign Hill is suffering a decline in international patronage and static growth in domestic visitation. Although only one hour's drive from Melbourne, the Melbourne visitation has fallen to 85-90,000 per annum.

Uncertainty on the international scene has combined with domestic factors to produce an uncertain trading environment for Sovereign Hill. These factors include changes to leisure patterns, higher discretionary expenditure on housing and household goods, plus the more recent emergence of low cost air carriers and rapidly rising fuel prices.

As a result, Sovereign Hill's advertising thrust has moved away from the traditional 'here we are – come and see us' style, to a more events-focused promotion. This aims to attract higher domestic and local visitation, as well as to shorten the return visit cycle.

The research

Major consumer research conducted in Melbourne during 2004 revealed the key elements of the Sovereign Hill 'brand' to the management. Not surprisingly, gold was found to be a key motivator. The research showed that a visit was not a spontaneous event for most people, but usually involved a planning phase. While the product was seen to offer good value and high enjoyment, the research showed that it would probably be 7 years before most people returned.

For many years Sovereign Hill has undertaken 'exit' surveys. These are self-completion forms, which are available to people upon leaving the property. This primarily enables visitors to provide feedback on their visit. However, it has been found that this style of surveying tends to highlight the two extremes of the experience: those who have a grievance, or those who have loved the experience. It generates little 'middle ground' information and the research sample is not statistically robust enough to allow management to confidently act upon the data.

As a result, Sovereign Hill is changing to a random sample survey system, which will be conducted about six times a year. Though still a self-completion format, it will be issued to every 'nth' person as they arrive at the property, in order to achieve random sampling. The questions will elicit information about the decision-making process, especially regarding motivation, responses to advertising and the trip planning process.

The new survey process will be methodologically sound and the sample of about 2,000 responses p.a. will be a more robust sample, from which management can confidently base decisions. The system will be managed in house, with Ballarat University providing data processing support. It will cost about \$5,000 per year to implement.

To provide a more in depth evaluation of the visitor experience, Sovereign Hill also hopes to undertake an annual visitor 'audit'. This will more objectively and deeply measure the quality of the visitor experience and assess overall service standards. The system will be similar to 'mystery shopping' audits, which are commonly undertaken for the retail sector. Use of a web-based recording system means that results could be available almost immediately, as opposed to the weeks it can take to data-process written surveys and to generate reports.

Results

The Director of Marketing believes that the random entry surveys, to be conducted six times a year, will show management where the Sovereign Hill brand is sitting in peoples' minds and if the current product offering is still relevant to the marketplace.

In particular, he believes that it will show whether the product needs to be strongly history focussed or whether it can achieve higher visitor engagement through a greater emphasis on entertainment.

He says that the proposed visitor experience 'audits' will show management whether Sovereign Hill is delivering on its brand promise and whether it is meeting customer expectations. The audits should provide more immediate results, so that management can address issues as they arise.

They may also be able to measure response to particular advertising campaigns and incentives. In particular, he is hoping that the audits will reveal where Sovereign Hill may be over-delivering on aspects that do not contribute to the bottom-line result and, conversely, where it may be worth making additional effort to achieve greater return on investment.

Key lessons

- Sovereign Hill believes that the combination of random entry surveys and the proposed annual audits will work hand-in-hand to provide a more balanced understanding of the needs and wants of its visitors.
- There is little point in undertaking research unless the management is receptive to change and is prepared to act on the problems that it might reveal. This is typically addressed through product redevelopment, training, marketing etc.
- Simple feedback forms tend to provide responses at the extremes of experience, but fail to provide the more valuable middle-ground data.
- Survey methods need to be statistically robust and use an adequate sample before data can be confidently relied upon to make important decisions.

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